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AUKUS and the role of ASEAN centrality in managing regional security affairs

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Abstract. Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America announced the formation of the AUKUS pact covering the Indo-Pacific region. Many countries gave different reactions to the formation of the pact, which, among others, aimed at developing cooperation in nuclear-powered defense among the parties involved. Many observers also viewed that AUKUS is aggressively meant to suppress China in the Asia-Pacific by equipping Australia, its ally in the region, with nuclear-powered submarines. ASEAN countries gave different views on the issue of AUKUS that suggest the division of ASEAN's interests over the issue. Some experts even view that the AUKUS issue is increasingly weakening ASEAN, which struggles to maintain its unity and "centrality" in regional security affairs. This paper argues that ASEAN, with its unity and centrality, remains the primary guardian of regional peace and security and will forever remain at the "driving seat" of regional security management, which major countries cannot ignore. This paper will review the importance of ASEAN in maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region. The preservation of regional peace and security will ultimately provide prosperity for the people and countries of the Southeast Asian region, as stated in the Bangkok Declaration, which underlies the formation of ASEAN. This paper will also examine how ASEAN deals with current challenges as well as major powers in the region before analyzing the effectiveness of ASEAN centrality in managing regional security affairs.

Keywords. AUKUS, ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN Political-Security Community, Regional Security, Major Powers

1. Background

On September 15, 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America announced the formation of the AUKUS pact covering the Indo-Pacific region. Many countries gave different reactions to the formation of the pact, which, among others, aimed at developing cooperation in nuclear-powered defense among the parties involved. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, referred to as a "forever partnership," will allow for far greater cooperation in the realms of security, defense, technology, and industry (Mazza, 2021). UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the pact would "preserve security and stability around the world" (BBC News, September 2021). US President Joe Biden also said that "AUKUS is a new enhanced trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States where our technology, our scientists, our industry, our defense forces are all working together to deliver a safer and more secure region that ultimately benefits all. AUKUS will also enhance our contribution to our growing network of partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region:

ANZUS; our ASEAN friends; our bilateral strategic partners, the Quad; Five Eyes countries; and, of course, our dear Pacific family” (Biden 2021). As a response, China has condemned the pact as "extremely irresponsible," and Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said it "seriously undermines regional peace and stability and intensifies the arms race" (BBC News, September 2021).

Many observers viewed that AUKUS is aggressively meant to suppress China in the Asia-Pacific by equipping Australia, its ally in the region, with nuclear-powered submarines. This could create new tensions in the region, particularly in the South China Sea. As an individual ASEAN country, Indonesia called on Australia “to maintain its commitment towards regional peace, stability, and security in accordance with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation as well as underscores the respect for international law, including UNCLOS 1982, in maintaining peace and security in the region” (Indonesia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2021). Malaysia expressed its concern that “AUKUS could potentially spark a nuclear arms race in the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, it was feared that the move would provoke other powers to also act aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea” (Malay Mail, September 2021). On the other hand, Singapore “hoped that AUKUS would contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the regional architecture” (Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2021). In the same tone, the Philippines believes that “the fresh enhancement of Australia’s military capacity through this trilateral security partnership would be beneficial in the long term even to the other side if only for the additional time it affords all protagonists for reflection before reacting” (The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, September 2021).

Different views among individual ASEAN countries suggest that ASEAN's interests are divided over the AUKUS issue. Some experts even view that the AUKUS issue is increasingly weakening ASEAN, which struggles to maintain its unity and "centrality" in regional security affairs. The question is, is it true that ASEAN's position and ASEAN's centrality have weakened? Do major countries that play in the region, such as the US and China, no more extended support ASEAN centrality and even view that ASEAN centrality is ineffective in managing regional security. This paper argues that ASEAN, with its concept of centrality, remains the primary guardian of regional security and will forever remain at the "driving seat" of regional security management, which major countries cannot ignore. This paper will review the importance of ASEAN in maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region. The preservation of regional peace and security will ultimately provide prosperity for the people and countries of the Southeast Asian region, as stated in the Bangkok Declaration, which underlies the formation of ASEAN. This paper will also analyze the effectiveness of ASEAN centrality in managing the regional security affairs and how ASEAN deals with current challenges as well as major powers in the region with the formation of AUKUS.

2. ASEAN and the term of ASEAN centrality

Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN is a regional organization in the Southeast Asian region and has become one of the important entities in the study of International Relations. ASEAN was initially founded by Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines on August 8, 1967, to promote economic growth, social progress, and cultural development. Since its establishment, ASEAN has expanded to include other Southeast Asian countries to join, namely Brunei Darussalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999).

The formation of ASEAN started from the idea of creating a peaceful, safe, stable, and prosperous Southeast Asia region. More than a decade before the formation of ASEAN, the

world constellation was marked by the cold war as a result of the end of the second world war. During the cold war, the United States of America and the Soviet Union were considered major powers that continue to influence any other relatively small countries in various regions, including Southeast Asia. The two major powers were also known as the Western and the Eastern Bloc, and they were known to compete against each other to spread both their ideology and to attain their geopolitical interests around the world. Maizland and Albert stated that formed in 1967, ASEAN sought to create a common front against the spread of communism and promote political, economic, and social stability amid rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific (Maizland and Albert, 2020). The major powers' competition for ideological influence can drag Southeast Asia countries into devastating armed conflicts. The leaders of Southeast Asia countries are aware that there needs to be cooperation that can reduce mutual suspicion and encourage efforts to joint development in the region.

The birth of ASEAN essentially was a response to its environment's internal and external challenges. These challenges generated the shared views among Southeast Asian leaders of achieving common interests based on the belief in the need for efforts to further strengthen existing ties of regional solidarity and cooperation, given that within the region, the landscape was characterized by several territorial disputes among countries. For example, the dispute of Sabah between the Philippines and Malaysia (1962), the dispute of Batu Putih Island between Malaysia and Singapore (1976), the border disputes between Malaysia and Thailand, and the case of Sipadan and Ligitan between Indonesia and Malaysia. In the case of Spratly Island, the dispute is among Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, China, and Taiwan. Hence, ASEAN is considered to be the most successful regional organization in terms of the promotion of regional peace and stability.

The principle of non-interference was considered one of the underlying successes of ASEAN, which has been stated in the Bangkok Declaration from the beginning of its formation as a manifestation of rejection of the intervention of major powers in the region. Preambular paragraph of the Bangkok Declaration stated that:

"CONSIDERING that the countries of South-East Asia share a primary responsibility for strengthening the economic and social stability of the region and ensuring their peaceful and progressive national development and that they are determined to ensure their stability and **security from external interference** in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples."

The phrase "security from external interference" is the central vision to create a peaceful and safe area to realize regional prosperity by fostering good relations between countries in the region, major powers and including building regional identity without leaving the ASEAN member country's socio-cultural background. Therefore, the Bangkok Declaration underlined the aims and purposes of the Association among others are as follows:

1. To accelerate the economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations;
2. To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.
3. To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilization of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of

international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communication facilities, and the raising of the living standards of their peoples;

4. To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves.

To maintain the organization's continuity and survive amid increasingly rapid globalization, ASEAN made many changes for the welfare of member countries. After being officially established through the Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN also has the ASEAN Charter to change ASEAN, which was initially only a regional association into an international association with a solid legal basis, absolute rules, and an effective and efficient organizational structure. At the 13th ASEAN Summit in Singapore on November 20, 2007, ten ASEAN member countries signed the ASEAN Charter. In *the ASEAN Charter*, the vision to create a peaceful and safe area by fostering good relations between countries in the region and the major powers, is reaffirmed in the last point of Article 1 of the Charter, which reads, "To maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relation and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive." The ASEAN Charter is the primary basis for realizing regional progress and stability based on three community pillars, namely ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Supported by the principle of non-interference, the ASEAN Charter has also become the basis for maintaining harmony and as a guideline for steering internal and external affairs of regional countries.

The term of ASEAN Centrality is contained in the APSC Blueprint 2025 as one of the key characteristics of APSC, that is "an outward-looking community that deepens cooperation with our external parties, upholds and strengthens ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture, and plays a responsible and constructive role globally based on an ASEAN common platform on international issues" (APSC Blueprint, 2016). The ASPC Blueprint further elaborated ASEAN Centrality into two main key elements, namely (i) Strengthen ASEAN unity, cohesiveness and centrality in shaping the evolving regional architecture built upon ASEAN-led mechanisms; and (ii) Deepen cooperation with Dialogue Partners, strengthen engagement with other external parties and reach out to new potential partners for mutually beneficial relations as well as respond collectively and constructively to global developments.

A. Strengthen ASEAN unity, cohesiveness and centrality in shaping the evolving regional architecture built upon ASEAN-led mechanisms consists of elements as follows:

1. Strengthen ASEAN centrality in shaping the evolving regional architecture that is open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based:
 - a) Elaborate a common vision for a regional architecture to strengthen ASEAN centrality in view of the changing strategic and geopolitical landscape;
 - b) Ensure the effective implementation of the Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations and explore a legally binding instrument building upon the TAC for the wider region; and
2. Strengthen the effectiveness of ASEAN-led mechanisms, including streamlining their work processes
 - a) Continue initiating, hosting, chairing and/or co-chairing activities and meetings with Dialogue Partners and other external parties within the context of all ASEAN-led mechanisms;



- b) Strengthen and consolidate the EAS process as a Leaders-led forum for strategic dialogue on political, security and economic issues as well as cooperation, including establishing appropriate arrangements to facilitate preparation, consistency, continuity and follow-up of issues deliberated upon by the Leaders;
- c) Strengthen the ARF as an important forum for identifying and addressing existing and emerging security challenges, through enhanced confidence-building measures and concrete steps towards preventive diplomacy, including through the effective implementation of the Ha Noi Plan of Action to implement the ARF Vision Statement as well as work towards more effective working methods to deliver substantive outcomes at ARF meetings;
- d) Strengthen the ADMM and ADMM-Plus processes to help advance the ASEAN vision of the regional architecture, reinforce ASEAN centrality and work towards enhancing the regional capacity and joint capabilities in addressing current and future challenges and opportunities.

B. Deepen cooperation with Dialogue Partners, strengthen engagement with other external parties and reach out to new potential partners for mutually beneficial relations as well as respond collectively and constructively to global developments

1. Strengthen substantial and strategic cooperation with Dialogue Partners.
 - a) Adopt a more strategic approach vis-à-vis Dialogue Partners by identifying ASEAN interests and priorities with respective Dialogue Partners;
 - b) Work with Dialogue Partners, through existing mechanisms, to address existing and emerging challenges as well as strengthen development cooperation in ASEAN;
2. Develop and maintain effective partnerships with external parties to support the ASEAN Community Vision 2025
 - a) Strengthen ASEAN relations with external parties, including the Special Observer and Guests of ASEAN;
 - b) Develop projects and ensure the effective and efficient utilisation of the cooperation funds and other funds relating to ASEAN cooperation with external parties to support the ASEAN Community;
 - c) Consider requests from external parties for formal partnership with ASEAN in accordance with the Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations, including on the basis of mutual interest and benefit to support ASEAN community building and taking into account the importance of a holistic perspective based on geostrategic considerations.
3. Explore substantial engagement with new potential partners
 - a) Consider new partnerships with interested and potential countries and organisations on the basis of mutual interest and benefit as well as their support to ASEAN community building; and
 - b) Explore other appropriate modalities to engage with new potential partners in mutually beneficial relations.
 - c) Enhance ASEAN capacity to contribute and respond to key international issues of common interest and concern
 - d) Enhance consultations and cooperation on multilateral issues of common interest and concern to project an ASEAN voice and develop common positions, where appropriate, to shape and drive important issues in the global agenda;
 - e) Develop more timely issuance of ASEAN Statements on important international issues of common concern;

Although the term ASEAN centrality has been outlined in the ASPC blueprint, academics and observers still define the concept of ASEAN Centrality. The Singapore Institute of International Affairs sees “ASEAN centrality as a concept that maintains the group’s legitimacy and credibility, which further enhances its capacity to play a leading role in determining the agenda for the broader region” (SIIA 2015, 12). Also, “ASEAN centrality has been defined by its growing leadership role in Asia’s regional architecture, and by its role as the main node in dense and overlapping regional networks connecting multiple stakeholders in the region” (Mely 2014). Other definition stated that “Centrality has been defined in terms of ASEAN as leader or driver, as convener or facilitator, as hub or key node, as an agent of (proposed) progress (and not just process), and as little more than an expedient device to preserve ASEAN’s primacy in Asian regionalism and to ward off any form of architectural renovation which could lead to its marginalization” (Tan 2017). In the author's view, although there are several definitions, including those that question the effectiveness of the concept of centrality, the essence of ASEAN centrality is by what is stated in Article 1 of the ASEAN Charter and the APSC Blueprint 2025. The key elements of ASEAN centrality include a proactive role in its cooperation with its external partners, strengthening ASEAN unity, deepening cooperation with Dialogue Partners and strengthening engagement with other external parties. Hence, ASEAN has successfully implemented these key elements and continued to maintain regional peace and stability.

Various dialogue meetings, initiated by ASEAN and involving major powers built in the mechanism of ADMM (ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting), ADMM Plus, ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), or East Asia Summit, have shown ASEAN's role as an excellent regional manager in maintaining peace. “ASEAN’s management of powerful external actors, primarily China and the United States (US), but also Japan and, increasingly, Australia, India, South Korea, and the European Union (EU), has been seen as a major achievement of the organization, often judged to be more significant than its internal progress” (Mueller 2019). The success of conducting various meetings under the scheme of the ASEAN-led mechanism also shows ASEAN's expertise in integrating key nodes to keep the region safe and stable. ASEAN continues to reach out to other external partner countries to help keep the Southeast Asian region safe by expanding the reach of countries that have the same interest in maintaining peace through participation in the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which ASEAN has agreed to since February 1976. In establishing relations with external partners, TAC emphasizes the need to adhere to the principle of "The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion" (Article 2 of the TAC). The United Nations also recognized ASEAN's responsibility in maintaining peace in the region through resolution A/Res/47/53 dated December 9, 1992, which specifically endorsed the TAC by stating, "Endorses the purposes and principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-East Asia and its provisions for the pacific settlement of regional disputes and for regional cooperation to achieve peace, amity, and friendship among the peoples of South-East Asia, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, which are consistent with the current climate of enhancing regional and international cooperation" (UN Resolution A/Res/47/53 1992). As of January 2021, there are 43 High Contracting Parties to the TAC (ASEAN.org).

ASEAN's success and expertise in managing relations with major powers to maintain regional security jointly are increasingly echoed by the cooperation mechanism in the Outlook on Indo-Pacific initiated by Indonesia. This scheme prioritizes inclusive cooperation in building a peaceful and prosperous region through joint partnerships with other countries. The Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which was ratified at the 34th ASEAN Summit on June 22, 2019, in

Bangkok, puts forward the centrality of ASEAN through the ASEAN-led mechanism that emphasizes the principles of peace, prosperity, and inclusiveness. Paragraph 56 of the Chairman's Statement of the 34th ASEAN Summit stipulated that:

“We adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific which will help guide ASEAN’s engagement and cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific region. We reaffirmed ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, complementarities, a rules-based order anchored upon international law, and commitment to advancing economic engagement in the region as the main principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, ASEAN-led mechanisms can serve as platforms for dialogue and implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation. We encouraged external partners to support and undertake cooperation with ASEAN on the key areas outlined in the Outlook as their contribution to maintaining peace, freedom and prosperity in the region. We commended the efforts taken by all ASEAN Member States, in particular Indonesia for taking the lead in this regard, in finalising the Outlook which embodies ASEAN unity, centrality and leadership in the evolving regional architecture.”

In this way, ASEAN's centrality functions and gets more recognition. “ASEAN centrality, the principle by which ASEAN countries maintain their leadership role in the regional architecture, envisions that the 10-member grouping can and should engage with extra-regional powers, while always upholding ASEAN interests, and never allowing external powers to push their own agendas in the region” (Tsjeng 2016). Unfortunately, many parties, including observers and academics, still doubt and question the effectiveness of ASEAN centrality just because the Myanmar and South China Sea crisis has not been resolved.

The doubts of many parties also touch on the unity of ASEAN, which is the essential value of the regional organization that was established in 1967, especially with the increasing power of China's influence in the region. "Differences over China, particularly Beijing's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea where several ASEAN member-states have been locked in maritime territorial disputes with China, have exposed ASEAN unity and raised questions about the regional bloc's centrality" (Yhome 2020). Over the past few decades, China has militarized the South China Sea by turning tiny atolls and shoals into permanent heavily armed military bases. It has forcibly occupied islands belonging to ASEAN member countries and aggressively challenged the territorial integrity of the littoral states. “And all this in blatant disregard of a 2016 ruling by an independent arbitral tribunal established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that China’s claims to much of the South China Sea have no merit at all” (Ignatius 2019).

3. **The AUKUS as a new challenge to strengthen ASEAN centrality**

Doubts about the effectiveness of the ASEAN centrality grew stronger after the formation of AUKUS in September 2021. The significant initiative for AUKUS is the joint development of a new nuclear-powered attack submarine for Australia. The three countries' cooperation in the AUKUS format is very influential for security stability in the Southeast Asia region, considering that efforts to develop technology and nuclear weapons in the AUKUS scheme can trigger arms competition. On the other hand, as a target, China will undoubtedly take balancing steps in dealing with the aggressiveness of the US and the "forever partnership" group that is its partner in the Indo-Pacific region. While it is considered to jeopardize the security and stability of the region, some experts also viewed that “AUKUS will weaken ASEAN’s aspiration of “centrality” in regional security affairs and further undermining its unity” (Valencia 2021). This observation was based on the fact that ASEAN up to now has been

struggling to maintain its unity and centrality in regional security affairs. "Its unity has been riven by the US-China contest for regional dominance. Worse, its confidence and reputation have been shaken by its failure to manage two major security issues in its region-the crisis in Myanmar and that in the South China Sea" (Ibid). The doubts of the effectiveness of ASEAN's centrality also stem from differences in the responses of ASEAN countries to the formation of AUKUS, giving rise to a perception that clarifies the increasingly incohesive ASEAN in taking a stand against any changes that have the potential to threaten regional security stability. It is increasingly difficult for ASEAN to reach an ASEAN consensus given the differences in interests related to the existence of AUKUS. The existence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), formed by India, Japan, the US, and Australia in 2007, was previously seen as a factor that could erode ASEAN's unity and centrality. It is because this group can conduct joint military exercises and drill around the South China Sea in addition to its primary mission of promoting cooperation, among others, in the field of vaccine delivery, climate change, and technology development.

In this regard, the author argues that ASEAN, with its unity and centrality, remains the primary guardian of regional peace and security and will forever remain at the "driving seat" of regional security management, which major countries cannot ignore. It is undeniable that the presence of the "forever partnership" group has a significant influence on regional security stability, considering that their vision of developing nuclear technology and weapons can trigger competition for nuclear weapons development. ASEAN countries are aware of this possibility which can also endanger the individual security of each ASEAN country that cannot match the group's nuclear weapons technology. In this regard, ASEAN is long-established to uphold the obligation to prioritize the values of unity to maintain and create a safe and peaceful region according to the vision contained in the ASEAN Charter while still securing the national security interests of each of its members' countries.

The facts prove that ASEAN can manage activities that lead to a nuclear race in the region. It is done by implementing the South East Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) mechanism, a treaty signed at the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in 1995 to create a free Southeast Asia region from a nuclear weapon. It is in line with ASEAN's vision to contribute to the realization of the implementation of the principles of the UN charter to maintain world peace by establishing a free zone nuclear weapon. Unfortunately, big countries like China, France, Russia, Britain, and the United States (Permanent-5) have not been willing to accede to SEANWFZ. This condition is a challenge for ASEAN, which continues to try to convince P5 to be willing to accede to the treaty. Furthermore, ASEAN has other challenges that require extra energy in its approach. The challenge is none other than the conflict related to the South China Sea. The ASEAN Summit in December 1998 resulted in the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea (CoC). The CoC seeks to make rules for prohibiting conflict, especially for countries interested in the South China Sea. In addition to resolving disputes, the CoC is also expected to develop cooperation in the South China Sea among member countries and countries outside the ASEAN region.

These sensitive issues under the scheme of SEANWFZ and CoC are indeed challenges that need to be resolved. However, these challenges, including the existence of a new challenge in the form of AUKUS, do not necessarily make ASEAN marginalized and become spectators in its region. "ASEAN can continue to be a central player in the region – despite these sweeping changes in the dynamics of major power rivalry and other issues "(Tay 2019, 100). Through a formal statement, Australia and the United States also emphasized that "this cooperation will in no way weaken ASEAN's centrality in efforts to develop regional security and stability, especially in the Indo-Pacific region." Australia and the United States, through a formal

statement, also emphasized that their governments "are firmly committed to Southeast Asia, ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN-led architecture... and underscored the role of the East Asia Summit as the region's premier, a leaders-led forum for addressing strategic challenges and expressed their ongoing support for the practical implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (US Department of States 2021). Although the statements of the two countries are not necessarily a guarantee to be implemented, at least they are a reflection of respect and appreciation for ASEAN. It also opens up opportunities for ASEAN to further involve major countries to maintain security and peace through ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as ARF and EAS, to reduce mutual distrust and potential miscalculation strategies that can trigger conflict in the region as well as to provide excellent benefits to the region and the world. ASEAN must again demonstrate its expertise in managing the region and taking advantage of the US-China competition for the benefit of the region. The critical thing that needs to be done is to encourage the external partners to cooperate within the framework of the "ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP)" to create an integrated and connected region, promote dialogue, emphasize development for prosperity, and make the maritime aspect and element of regional planning. By developing AOIP cooperation, which covers "maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of cooperation" (ASEAN.org 2019), ASEAN will always maintain its centrality and principles as stated in the ASEAN Declaration and the ASEAN Charter.

4. CONCLUSION

Various challenges in the region, including the South China Sea conflict and the Myanmar crisis, cannot be used as a benchmark for the loss of unity and weakening ASEAN as a manager of security and peace in the Southeast Asian region. The AUKUS "forever friendship" group, assumed to be a counterweight to China's aggressiveness, does not necessarily marginalize and ignore ASEAN and even eliminates the principle of ASEAN centrality in the region as the main theatre of the emerging great power competition. ASEAN centrality, the principle by which ASEAN countries maintain their leadership role in the regional architecture, as outlined in the ASEAN Declaration and ASEAN Charter, will always engage with extra-regional powers and never allow external powers to push their agendas. "Nonetheless, ASEAN must continue to make sure that it speaks with a unified voice and expands the scope of its cooperation, so as not lose its solidarity, relevance, and centrality" (Tsjeng 2016). One of the collaborations that require actual development and implementation is cooperation within the AOIP framework by involving all external ASEAN partners, including the UK, which has just joined as an ASEAN dialogue partner. The AOIP cooperation framework, apart from relying on a commitment to achieve peace, stability, and mutual prosperity, also puts forward the centrality of ASEAN as the best option that benefits all parties.

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